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ABSTRACT

The Countryside Council is a citizen-based non-partisan public interest research group based in 19 counties of rural southwestern Minnesota. Each year the Council identifies particular problems or needs of the region and sets up task forces to study each problem and make recommendations for resolution. During 1977-79 six task forces were at work. The 135 member School Finance Task Force focused on the way agricultural land was assessed for tax purposes, challenging the notion that "current market price" was the proper basis for valuing farm land. The group noted that, while land prices in southern Minnesota have gone up 345% since 1972, the farmer's income has not gone up nearly that fast. The task force on the economic status of women concentrated on the need for child care; financial issues such as inheritance laws, credit, and social security; and employment practices related to wage levels, sex discrimination and awareness of Affirmative Action programs. Members of the Telephone Task Force suggested ways to improve rural telephone service, and the Young Farmers Task Force studied the obstacles confronting young people who wish to enter farming today. Other task forces looked at energy supply and consumption and how communication technology could overcome some of the problems of rural isolation and sparsity of population. This report presents task force activities and recommendations and describes some of the programs of the Countryside Council itself. (DS)

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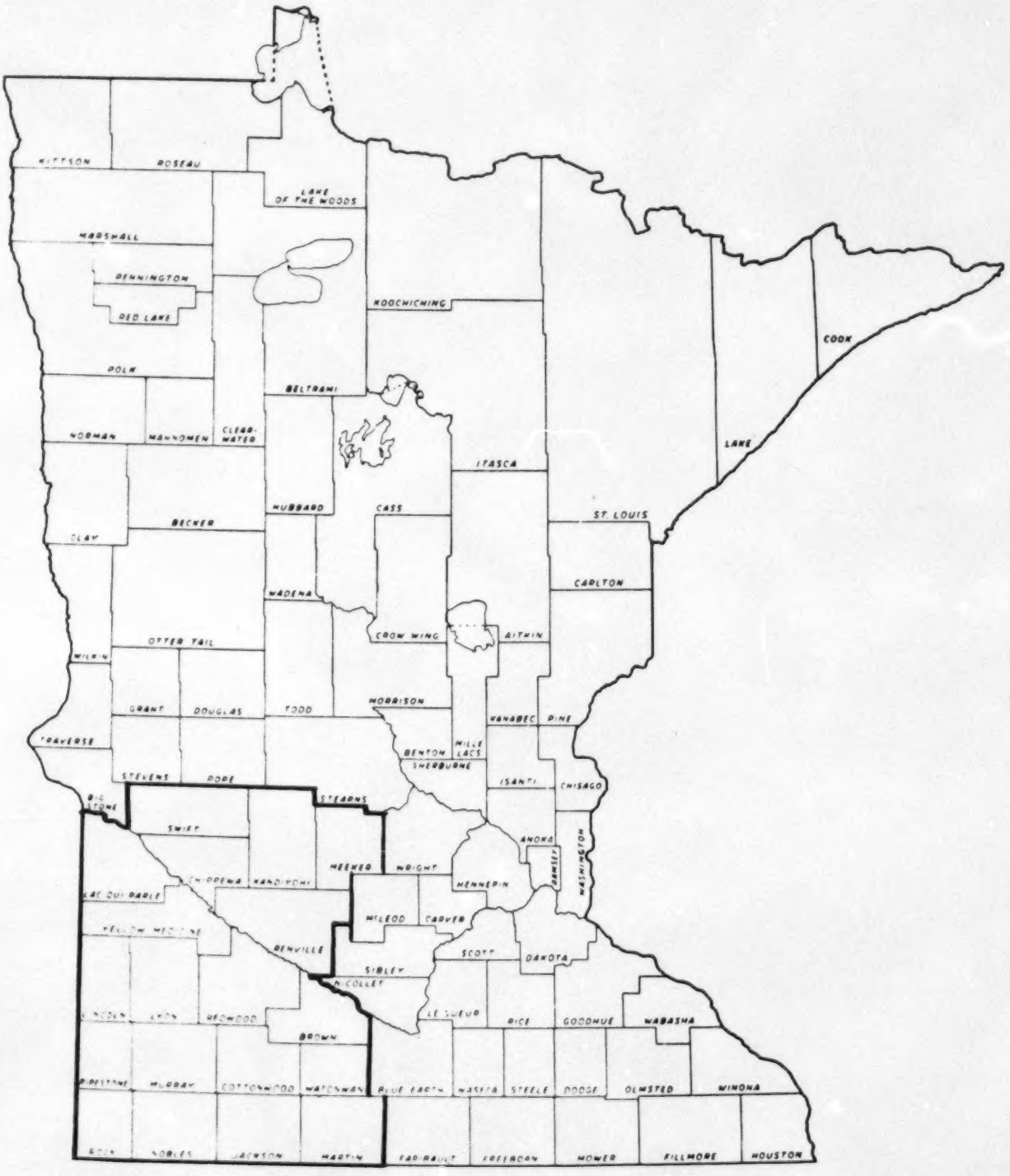
Countryside Council Service Area



The Countryside Council

Southwest State University
Marshall MN 56258
507/537-6291

Biennial Report
1977-79

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Foreword

The past two years, 1977-79, have been eventful and productive times for the Countryside Council. At the beginning of the 1977-78 year we set ourselves two main objectives for the biennium: to continue to involve citizens in solving public policy problems; and to begin to develop a funding base in our region of southwestern Minnesota.

To meet our first objective, our main activity has been to continue our task forces, where citizens research problems and recommend solutions. Six task forces have been at work over the last two years. Two new task forces were started in 1978-79, one on School Finance, the other on the Economic Status of Women. These issues interested nearly three hundred people in the Council process. Both the School Finance and the Energy Task Forces have testified before state legislative committees, and both groups have seen many of their recommendations adopted The task force on the Economic Status of Women has generated much important data about working women in small towns, and about child care needs in the region. We could not be prouder of our task forces' success.

In addition, we held well attended Legislators' Days in 1977 and 1978; we met together for program setting and evaluation conferences in Marshall in 1977 and in Tyler in 1979. Both of these annual events help us to fulfill our goal of encouraging involvement and interest in the Countryside Council and in the critical issues facing our region.

In working on our second objective, that of developing a local funding base, we have had some setbacks. Our joint capital campaign with the Southwest State University Foundation was not as successful as we had hoped. In our area, as in so many rural areas, there is no legacy of financial giving; this tradition takes time to build. But the setbacks we have met have forced us to take a critical look at our activities, and to re-evaluate our fund-raising plans; this process has brought very positive results. A Self-Study Task Force was set up in March 1979, and came up with concrete recommendations for changes in structure and fund-raising strategy. This self-study process has given us all a new enthusiasm and commitment to the Council.

A VIEW FOR THE 1979-80 YEAR

The 1979-80 year is a planning year for the Countryside Council. We will be looking at where we want to be in five years, and working out detailed plans to meet our goals. We are grateful to the Kellogg Foundation for allowing us to carry over funds from 1978-79 to support our operating costs for the year, and also to the Bush Foundation of St. Paul for their help.

Major changes will be made in the Council structure this year. It is an appropriate time in the development of the Council for the citizens to take a more active role in the administrative side of its work. For this reason the Council will be incorporating as a private non-profit group. We do, however, intend to continue our close cooperation with Southwest State University, and to work with the University towards our joint goals of service to the region. Another long range goal of the Council will be to develop a number of "mini-Councils" throughout the region to strengthen local participation.

Amidst this activity, several new task forces will be set up on a variety of issues; a recycling project in Kandiyohi and Renville Counties; studying how citizens can be involved in land use decisions; small community revitalization; a feasibility study for a Health Maintenance organization; and a look at the economic impact of power plant siting. It is an ambitious agenda but one we feel we can carry out this year.

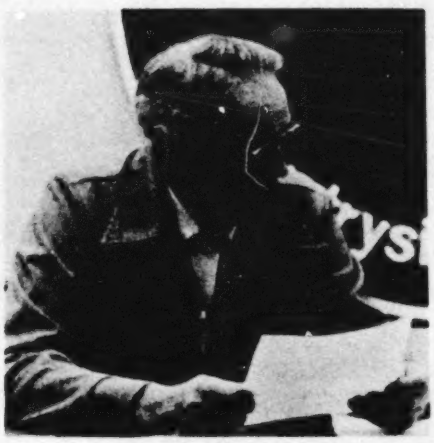
Another goal for the coming year will be to continue the important work of the Community Development Information Center, and to expand our monthly newsletter, *Prairie Schooner*, giving it a more local emphasis. It will be a very busy, but a very exciting year.

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation's funding for the "Challenge in the Countryside" project, which evolved into the Countryside Council ended in June 1979. We know that we can never completely express our gratitude to the Kellogg Foundation for their faith and support in us over the past six years. Their commitment has given so many of us a chance to become involved in the public life of our region, to work in partnership with other citizens and educators, and to discover in ourselves new abilities and capacities for leadership. We thank the Kellogg Foundation for providing these opportunities and for the strength they have helped us to discover.

–Jackie Zerr, Chairperson
–John Zwach, Vice-Chairperson

John Flanagan, Magnolia and Ray Johnson, Windom

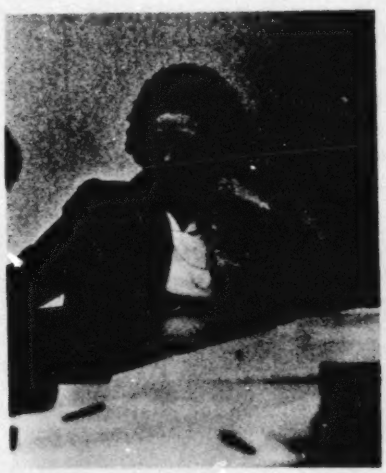
Mary Bruns, Marshall



Porter Olstad, Hanska (Council Chairperson 1977-78)

Harold Bierbaum, New Ulm and Elroy Burgeson, Granite Falls

Clint Haroldson, Renville



Martha Beal, Milan

About the Countryside Council

The Countryside Council is a citizen-based non-partisan public interest research group based in the 19 counties of rural southwestern Minnesota. It is a partnership between citizens and a consortium of eight post-secondary educational institutions: Canby Area Vocational-Technical Institute, Granite Falls Area Vocational-Technical Institute, Jackson Area Vocational-Technical Institute, Pipestone Area Vocational-Technical Institute, Willmar Area Vocational-Technical Institute, Willmar Community College, Worthington Community College, the University of Minnesota and Southwest State University. One representative from each of these consortium schools and three citizen representatives from each county bring together their diverse interests and ideas on the Countryside Council.

Each year, the Council identifies particular problems or needs of the region. This identification process may involve conducting a survey or holding public meetings to learn the concerns of local people. But, in the past, the best ideas have come from individual Council members who listen and learn from others in their community: one might hear of a conflict between the County board and a state agency; another knows a young couple who may have to leave farming because they can't get a much needed loan; someone else is concerned about plans to build a new power plant near her town, on prime farm land.

Once the problem is identified, the Council sets up a special task force to study the problem in detail and make recommendations for its solution. These task forces are open to any interested person, and are assisted by the research staff of the Council. There have been about eighteen task forces so far, and because of a wide variety of issues, no two task force experiences have been alike.

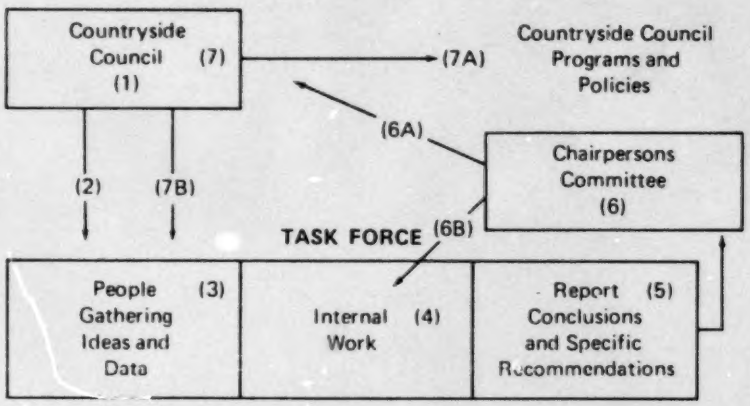
When the task force has finished its research, it sets out recommendations for the solution of the problem under study. These recommendations are then presented to the Council for their approval. The Council may have questions about these recommendations, and request the task force to do further study; but once the recommendations are accepted, Council and task force members work to implement these ideas.

The impact each task force has may be of three kinds: *Legislation* at the state or federal level may be enacted as a result of the task force's research (as the bills providing aid for abandoned rail line rehabilitation which the Commodity Transportation Task Force recommended); the task force may evolve into an *ongoing group or project,* (like the Arts Task Force growing into the Southwestern Minnesota Arts and Humanities Council); the work of each task force generates community discussion and *education* about public policy issues, and provides an opportunity for growth and *development of leadership* among task force members.

This process of involving citizens in influencing public policy decisions has involved thousands of people since 1973 when the Council began its work. People in rural areas can often feel isolated and apart from the decision makers in the city; the Countryside Council offers them the best chance to get involved with government, to examine complex problems and come up with workable and informed solutions.

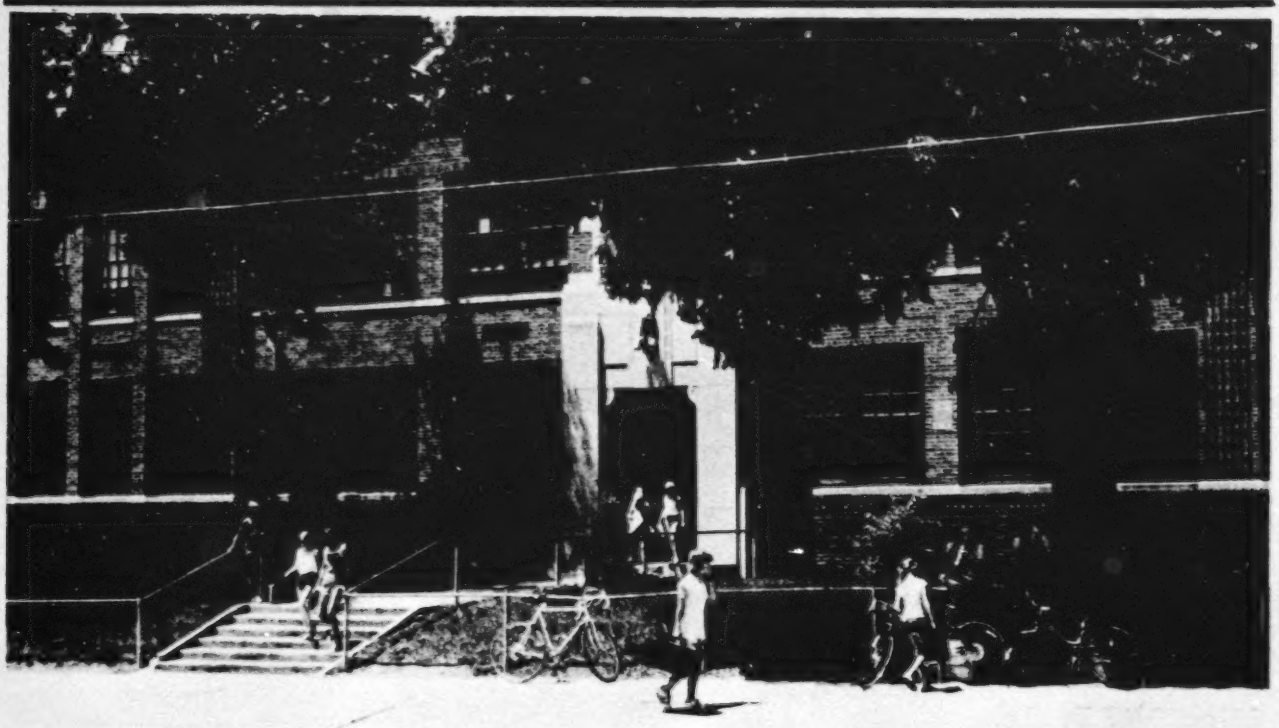
Task Force Process

CHALLENGE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE
Task Force Process and Reporting Procedures



1. Countryside Council identifies problem areas.
2. Countryside Council initiates the task force.
3. Task Force organizes and identifies specific problem areas.
4. Task Force sets up priorities and refines programs.
5. Task Force writes report with conclusions and specific recommendations and presents it to the Chairpersons Committee (2 weeks before meeting).
6. Chairpersons Committee Acts:
   A. If accepted, the report is presented to Countryside Council (Presentation at least 2 weeks before meeting).
   B. If not accepted report returns to Task Force with recommendations for further work.
7. Countryside Council Acts:
   A. If accepted, Council becomes advocate for implementation.
   B. If not accepted, report returns to Task Force with recommendations for further work.

School Finance



Chairpersons: Larry Leach, Milroy
Dale Krog, Tracy

Number of Members: 135

Activities and Impact:

The Minnesota School Foundation Aid Formula was designed in 1971 to equalize educational opportunities throughout the state, regardless of the wealth of the school district. The formula put a limit on the spending per pupil unit, and determined the amount of the local and state contribution to this dollar amount. But a combination of declining enrollment and skyrocketing property taxes – caught many rural school districts in a financial crunch; at least eight districts in our area got no Foundation Aid in 1978-79 to pay for teacher's salaries and administrative and maintenance costs.

To study this problem the Countryside Council set up the School Finance Task Force. A series of public meetings were held in September 1978 and the task force met twice a month between October and February. The group heard various speakers from local school boards, township and county assessors, and from the State Revenue Department.

The task force focused on the way of assessing agricultural land for tax purposes. They challenged the notion that the "current market price" was the proper basis for valuing farm land. Land prices in Southwest Minnesota have gone up 346% since 1972, but the farmer's income from that land has not gone up nearly that fast. The task force recommended that agricultural land be valued at the "rent capitalized value"; the rent-capitalized value of ag land measures the expected increases in value due to inflation.

The group made four other recommendations including raising spending limits per pupil unit, and providing for a minimum contribution by the state. Task force members testified before legislative committees several times. Three of the task force's five recommendations were enacted by the legislature in the 1979 session. Many of the task force members were on school boards or were county or township assessors. Larry Leach, the task force co-chair, said that learning about the whole process of property taxation through his work on the task force has helped him do a more effective job in his role as a township officer.

Economic Status of Women

Chairpersons: Carol Warner, Marshall
Jan Wood, Montevideo

Number of Members: 50

Activities and Impact:

The task force on the Economic Status of Women was created by the Countryside Council to respond to the changing role of women in the economy in our region. The Council was concerned about the legal rights of women, inequities in wages and promotional opportunities, and the need for more information and data about the problems of rural women.

After several public meetings throughout the region in the fall of 1978, the task force decided to concentrate its efforts in three areas: the need for child care, women and finance, and women and employment.

The child care group designed and distributed a survey of child care needs throughout the region. In March of 1979 the survey was distributed through the schools in Chippewa, Jackson, Lincoln and Lyon Counties. The survey findings included:

- almost 1/3 of those surveyed use child care regularly (more than six hours per week)
- 85% of parents using child care did so because they were employed
- 27% of the survey respondents who did not use child care at the moment, want to use it; half of these people said they would prefer to use a day care center over any other form of child care.

These findings were praised by government agencies as "very useful for planning to meet future child care needs."

The "Women and Finance" group considered its most important purpose to be providing public information on inheritance laws, social security, credit and investment. A Worthington, MN lawyer spoke to the task force in November 1978, about property rights and inheritance laws in the state. Other public meetings are planned for the fall of 1979. This group was particularly pleased to see legislation passed in the Minnesota legislature in 1979 which eliminates unfair inheritance tax laws. The task force supported the measure which recognize the contribution of the homemaker to the economic life of the family.

The "Women and Work" sub-group distributed a survey in Slayton and Pipestone, MN; the survey was designed to learn about wage levels, sex discrimination, and awareness of Affirmative Action programs in their workplace. The survey respondents reported salary levels ranging from $3,600 to $18.000 per year, with a median of $7,350. Most of the respondents (83%) were in clerical jobs; only a handful were aware of Affirmative Action plans at their workplace. Several underscored the reality of job sex segregation by saying "No man does work like mine." The problems which really disturbed most respondents concerned the "lack of respect" on the job:

> "Low pay for women and no promotion opportunities regardless of capabilities..."
>
> "I have tried for officer training but they are not in favor of women officers at this bank.... I have trained three installment loan officers (male)... it is up to me to train them so they can earn twice the money I do."

These survey findings will be part of the data collected by the organization, Working Women.

The task force also co-operated with "Project Mainstay," a new service in the area to help homemakers who are interested in re-entering the job market. The task force helped provide public information about the problems of displaced homemakers, women who must find a job because they have been widowed or divorced.

Telephone

Chairperson: Muriel Runholt, Lynd

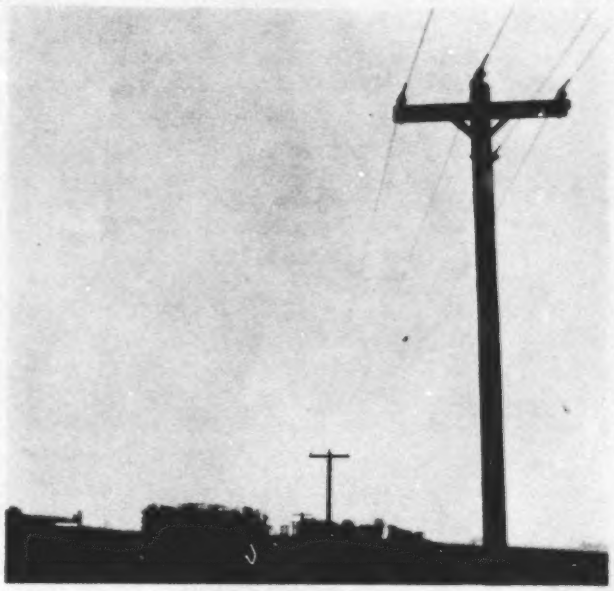
Number of Members: 200

Activities and Impact:

The Telephone Task Force was organized to try to improve telephone service in rural areas; inequitable rate structures, limited toll-free calling areas, inadequate repair service have been the focus of this group's concerns. Their efforts have succeeded in making the Minnesota Public Service Commission more aware and responsive to the needs of rural telephone consumers.

The group has continued to give well-prepared and informed testimony at local hearings. They co-sponsored a series of seminars on "Power to the People" to explore the relation between citizen advocacy and government agencies. They have participated in a federally funded study to develop a statewide plan for telecommunications rates and services. In February 1979 some task force members met with Governor Al Quie to discuss their ideas and concerns with him.

Although the group no longer meets as a formal task force the active and committed task force members have formed an ad hoc committee to monitor developments and respond to specific issues as they arise.



Young Farmers

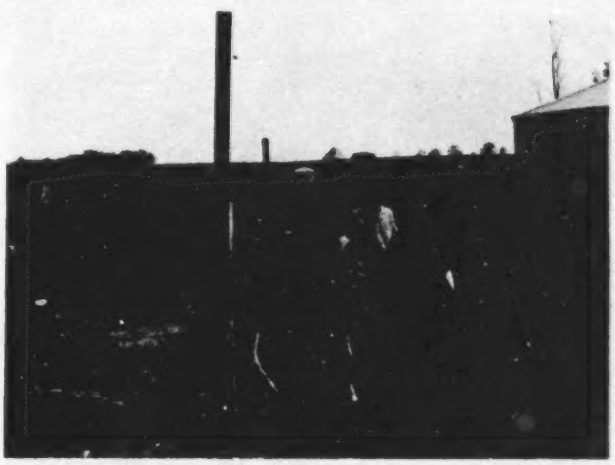
Chairperson: Paul Sobocinski, Wabasso

Number of Members: 130

Activities and Impact:

The Young Farmer's task force studied the obstacles confronting young people who wish to enter farming today. The difficulty of obtaining enough capital to buy land and adequate machinery is often insurmountable, and the task force has concentrated its efforts over the years on making government programs more responsive to the special needs of young people.

The group actively supported the Family Farm Security act in 1977; their recommendations for procedural changes in the Farmer's Home Administration were almost all adopted. They have also studied current taxation procedures to learn their effect on young men and women starting out and staying in agriculture. They have sponsored an Estate Planning Workshop for family farmers in April 1978, and have urged that more workshops by consortium schools and extension agents be offered to provide education on this topic.

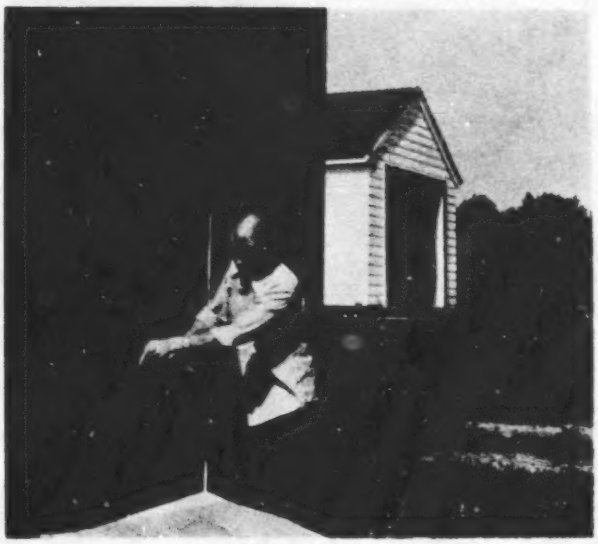


The task force finished their work in February 1979. They recommended that the Countryside Council set up a special "Small Farm Experience Transfer Project," whereby the skills of older, experienced farmers could be shared with younger people. Funding for such a program is being sought.

Energy

Chairpersons: Clint Haroldson, Renville
Morris Behrman, Wood Lake

Number of Members: 50



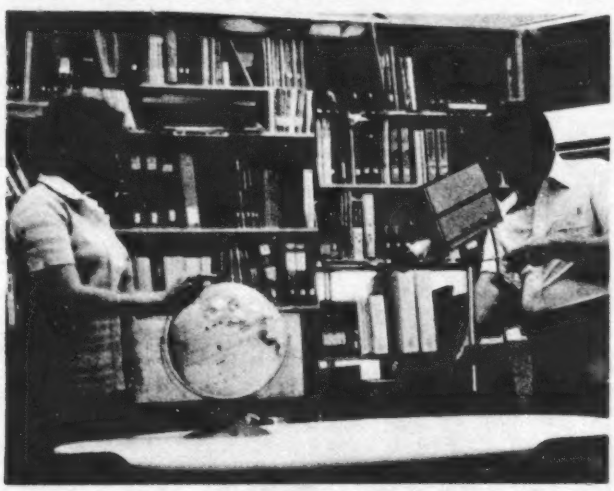
Activities and Impact:

The Energy Task Force has examined how the national problems of energy supply and consumption affect the people in southwestern Minnesota. They heard from a variety of resource people and read much on the subject, and in their final report to the Council, they came up with detailed proposals for a national, state and even an individual energy policy.

The focus of their recommendations was on education; people need to be more aware of how to conserve energy, and the potential for use of renewable energy sources. The task force strongly supported government aid to individuals for small-scale conservation projects, and projects involving solar, wind and other renewable energy sources. The group testified, before several legislative committees.

A series of well-attended "Energy Fairs" were held throughout the region in the summer and fall of 1977, providing information and examples of solar power to the public. Energy curriculum materials were compiled and made available to area schools. Copies were placed in the Community Development Information Center collection. Many of the task force members have since undertaken the building of their own alternative energy demonstration projects, reflecting their conviction that the solution to the national energy dilemma lies in the education and initiative of individual citizens.

Lifelong Learning



Chairperson: Nordis Olson, Heron Lake

Number of Members: 40

Activities and Impact:

The Lifelong Learning Task Force focused on how new communications technology could overcome one of the greatest problems of our region: rural isolation and sparsity of population. They were particularly interested in how education and training opportunities could be brought closer to the people of the area. The group is optimistic about the development of cable television and teleconferencing systems, and recommended that cooperation between educational institutions and community education programs be encouraged. The Countryside Council, following up on their recommendations has successfully used conference calls and teleconferencing to conduct committee meetings.

Community Development Information Center

The Community Development Information Center has worked with the task forces providing information useful to their studies. Teachers and students of the consortium schools used the resources of the Center as well as many local planners, agency personnel and local government people.

The materials in the Center reflect the past Countryside Council task forces. For example there are publications on alternative energy and energy curriculum materials. There is also a strong concentration on community development, planning for small towns and rural areas, and delivery of services in small towns and rural areas. An attempt has been made to maintain a collection of the most recent statistical information on southwest Minnesota. This includes the census, surveys and projections of population, income levels, sales, taxes, number of farms and businesses, and other relevant data. Information is also available on grants and funding sources, both public and private.

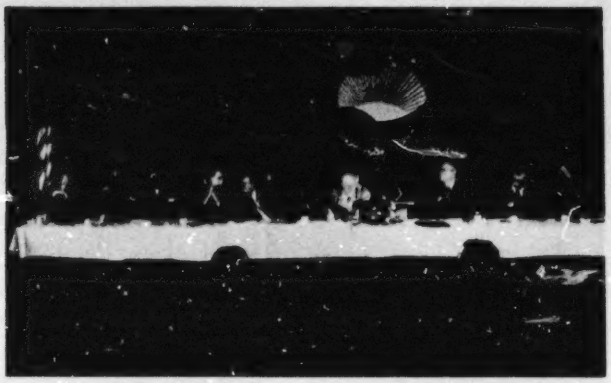
The newsletter *Prairie Schooner* has been published monthly. A calendar of regional events and a list of new publications in the CDIC are regular features.

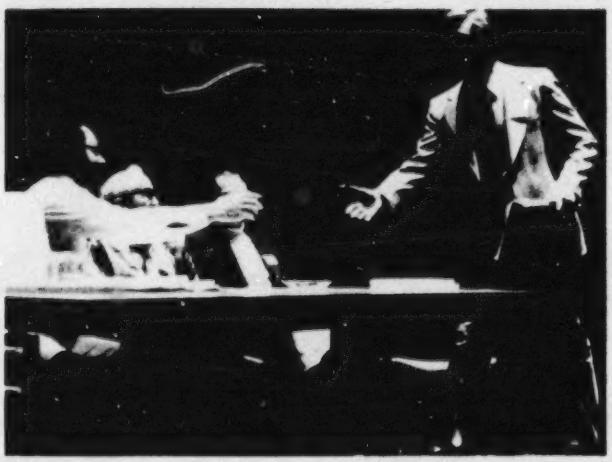
A cataloging system was devised to make it easier for people to find information in the Center. Most of the collection is now part of the new system.

Small Town Revival

The Council tried a new type of program in February 1978 in order to get at problems of rural communities. Under the title "Small Town Revival," the Council put on five day-long seminars throughout the region to consider problems small rural towns face today, and to search out new solutions. Jim Westkott and Dan Schler of the University of Colorado were the principle sepakers. Issues discussed included identification of the strengths and weaknesses of small town life, regional and local co-operation and the relation of economic development to community planning. These workshops were attended by many area leaders, and stirred up wide interest and press coverage in the area. Local people were given new ideas and enthusiasm for revitalizing their communities.

Legislators' Day



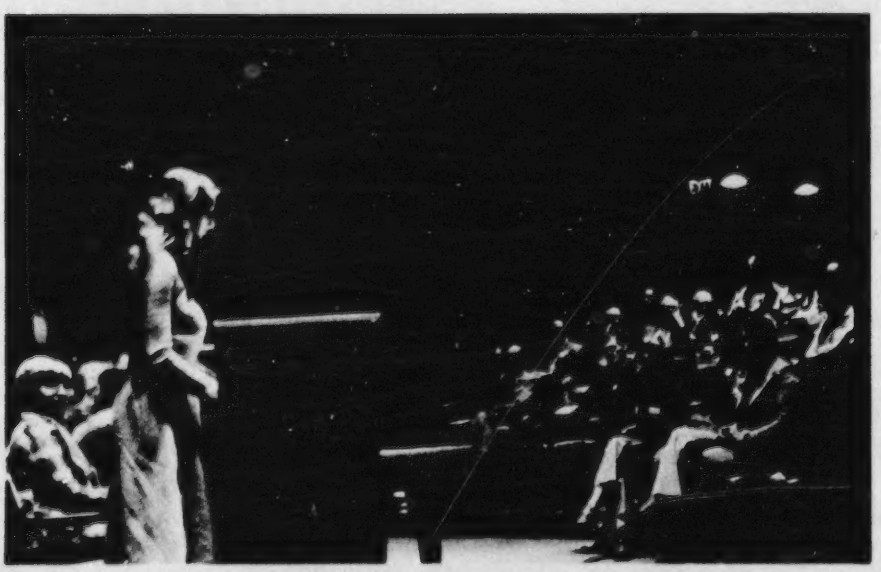


Each year on the last Tuesday in November, the Countryside Council invites state and federal legislators, and other special guests, for a day of getting acquainted and discussion of rural issues, and to look at the upcoming legislative session.

In 1977, Dr. William Nagle of the U.S.D.A. spoke about the importance of rural development programs and the intention of the U.S.D.A. to make full use of existing rural institutions especially citizen participation, decision making organizations like the Countryside Council. The rest of the day was given over to an informal discussion of future rural issues; in the evening Joel Barker, a futurist, spoke on possibilities for the future.

In 1978, the main speaker was the former Governor of Minnesota, the Honorable Elmer L. Andersen. Governor Andersen reminisced about his many years in public life and spoke of the importance of private citizens finding a way to "be involved in government and in their institutions... and of bringing these institutions back home." He referred to the Countryside Council and to other groups like it as people who have succeeded in this task.

"Land Use: What Choices Must We Make?" was the subject of the afternoon panel. The preservation of prime agricultural land, and changing patterns of land ownership were discussed by Dr. Barry Flinchbaugh, an agricultural economist from Kansas State University; Rep. Rick Nolan, of Minnesota's 6th Congressional District; Mr. Harry Major, of the Soil Conservation Service; Rev. John McRaith, of the Diocese of New Ulm; and State Senate Majority Leader Nicholas Coleman.



Financial Reports

COUNTRYSIDE COUNCIL FINANCIAL REPORT
Budget from July 1, 1977 – June 30, 1978

	BUDGET	EXPENDITURES	BALANCE
Personnel	$105,582	$91,107	$14,475
Supplies	30,080	19,053	11,027
Travel	29,965	14,296	15,669
Clerical	14,280	14,280	–0–
Projects	30,000	13,406	16,594
Total	$209,907	$152,142	$56,765

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COUNTRYSIDE COUNCIL FINANCIAL REPORT
Budget from July 1, 1978 – June 30, 1979

	BUDGET	EXPENDITURES	BALANCE
Personnel	$118,462.00	$103,952.85	$14,509.15
Supplies	26,349.00	19,379.66	6,969.34
Travel	30,000.00	11,705.48	18,294,52
Clerical	15,280.00	15,280.00	–0–
Projects	31,959.71	2,771.63	29,188.08
Totals:	$222,050.71	$153,089.62	$68,961.09

Countryside Council Members

Jackie Zerr, Chairperson
Marshall, MN

John Zwach, Vice-Chairperson
Lucan, MN

Mary Allen
Franklin, MN

Alan Anderson
Benson, MN

Clara Bartosh
Heron Lake, MN

Martha Beal
Milan, MN

Dennis Becker
DeGraff, MN

Morris Behrman
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New Ulm, MN

Mary Anne Birkey
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Willmar, MN

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Jane Kascht
Benson, MN

Dan Kocer
Pipestone, MN

Rev. John McRaith
New Ulm, MN

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Redwood Falls, MN

Joseph Rolling
Arco, MN

John Rollings
Madelia, MN

Muriel Runholt
Lynd, MN

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Sleepy Eye, MN

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Don Sebring
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Gerry Velde
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Granite Falls Area Vocational-Technical Institute
Elroy Burgeson, Director
Jackson Area Vocational-Technical Institute
Jim Pengra, Director
Pipestone Area Vocational Technical Institute
Marvin Thomsen, Director
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Robert D. Johnson, Vice President, Public Services & Development
University of Minnesota
Gordon Rose - Community Resource Development Program Director
Lois Mann - Community Resource Development Assistant Program Director
Arnie Sandager - SW District Director
Tom Halback - Agricultural Extension Agent

STAFF 1977-79

Jeffrey Doose, Director (1977-79)
Jeanette Sullivan, CDIC Librarian (1977-79)
Maggie Arzdorf-Schubbe, Task Force Coordinator (1977-78)
Jim Fox, Task Force Coordinator (1977-78)
Joanne Corbett, Task Force Coordinator (1978-79)
Steve Wiener, Task Force Coordinator (1978-79)
Joyce Johnson, Communications Director (1977-78)
Catherine Davidson, Communications Director (1978-79)
Jill Engebretson, Secretary (1977-79)
Kathie Nelson, Secretary (1977-79)

COUNTRYSIDE COUNCIL – SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA DATA

	State Total	19 County Total	Percentage of State
POPULATION			
Total (1970)	3,805,000	332,300	8.73
Under 20 years	1,525,494	129,264	8.48
Over 65 years	407,257	47,125	11.57
Total (1977 estimate)	3,975,000	336,200	8.46
Total (2000 estimate)	4,652,800	332,500	7.15
Under 20 years	1,336,280	91,864	6.87
Over 65 years	506,384	51,106	10.09
Families (1970)	921,332	83,544	9.07
Households (1970)	1,153,946	103,397	8.96
Rural Farm Population (1970)	488,285	117,506	24.07
PER CAPITA INCOME ESTIMATES (1975)	4,825	4,073	13.45
Income less than poverty level (1970)			
Persons	397,662	53,470	14.78
Families	75,923	11,219	10.78
Households	112,125	12,083	33.75
Cash (1976)			
Total cash income (thousands of dollars)	3,961,649	1,337,021	30.87
Crops (thousands of dollars)	1,720,943	531,174	35.23
Livestock (thousands of dollars)	2,181,606	768,542	63.12
Government payments (thousands of dollars)	59,100	37,305	15.97
LAND			
Square Miles	80,009	12,780	15.97
Acres	51,205,760	8,179,200	15.97
Land in Farms (acres) (1978)	30,600,000	7,913,900	25.86
Number of farms (1978)	114,000	28,045	24.60

Sources: *1970 Census of Population – Minnesota*, U. S. Dept. of Commerce.
Minnesota Agricultural Statistics 1978, Minnesota Dept. of Agriculture.
Minnesota Population Projections, 1970-2000, State Demographer, State Planning Agency.
Population Estimates for Minnesota Counties 1977, Office of the State Demographer, Minnesota State Planning Agency, 1978.